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METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR A TRANS-MODAL QUOTE REQUEST CHANNEL

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

The present invention pertains to retail sales. More particularly, the present invention is directed to a method and apparatus for providing improved communication of price and availability information between retailers and buyers in an economically and geographically fragmented marketplace.

Discussion of Related Art

In the United States new cars are marketed by both the manufacturers and the manufacturer's franchised dealers. This marketing effort involves both advertizing expenditures on mass-market media such as radio, television and newspapers, and investments in point of sale awareness features, such as providing well-trained customer service staff, and attractive showrooms and maintenance facilities. The domestic auto manufacturers and importers spend enormous sums on their advertizing campaigns, but that advertizing does not direct the prospective buyer to a specific retailer. That advertizing is directed toward creating product and brand awareness.

In the United States, the dealers who sell the automobiles then spend approximately \$6 billion each year on local advertising to encourage buyers to purchase those new cars from them. Much of this \$6 billion is spent on newspaper advertising. Small classified ads are used to sell individual cars, most often used cars, and as a supplement to the dealers' display ads. The display ads are traditionally, and preferably, published on Sundays. However competition for space in those Sunday papers is intense, and costly. Therefore the Sunday automobile ads most

often identify the advertiser as merely "your local authorized [manufacturer's brand] dealer" followed by a list of the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the local franchisees of that auto manufacturer or importer. Those ads are funded collectively by local franchisees through their advertizing cooperative, sometimes with matching contributions from the franchisor.

5 Advertising cooperatives are active for all 33 major automobile brands in most of the 56 major regional markets in the United States.

However, some things are changing in this traditional set up. More will have to change. The past four years are part of the longest continuous economic expansion in United States history. During this period of consistent economic expansion, new car dealership operations
10 have consistently lost money, according the National Association of Automobile Dealers.

During that period a substantial portion of automobile advertising activity has been redirected toward the Internet. This is, in part, to serve the public's interest. In 1998 it is estimated that 40% of all new car purchasers visited Internet web sites as a constituent part of their market search. However, financial self-interest is also served. For each new car sold, the
15 amount dealers spent on traditional media channels was reported to be \$400. In contrast, the average advertizing expenditure for a new car sold over the Internet by an independent Internet-based retailer was reportedly \$83.

Market-service (MS) web sites such as autobytel.com (Autobytel) and Microsoft's carpoint.msn.com (CarPoint) generally provide automobile price quotes on line by passing the
20 requests for quotes to existing retailers as exclusive sales leads, for a fee. Carpoint allows the prospective purchaser to select one or more retailers from a given list of CarPoint members who are located near to the buyer's stated address. These web sites have been popular because they

reduce buyers' search costs somewhat in a market that is at once both geographically dispersed, so as to make the search time consuming and, as a practical matter, geographically specific to the buyer's neighborhood since travel time for warranty service is also an issue.

Although the franchise structure that controls the marketing of new cars has little effect
5 on the market for used cars, a buyer's potential used-car market is also geographically specific, and the available used car inventory is still geographically dispersed so that, as with new cars, the market search costs for buyers are high. Thus, these web sites also list used cars. Moreover, the perceived ability of these web sites to reduce search costs for the potential buyer depends on the apparent completeness its information. Thus, they often include not only both the used and new
10 car inventories of subscribers, but also for-sale-by-owner (FSBO) classified ads on their websites.

The proliferation of subscription and fee-for-service automobile marketing websites, such as those called "AutoAdvantage", "Autobytel", "Autoweb", "CarOrder", "CarPoint",
"CarSmart", and "CarsDirect", etc. has led manufacturers to launch the GMBuypower.com web
15 site and the "Buyer Connection" section of Ford.com, among others. However, the manufacturers' web sites are at a disadvantage relative to these marketing service web sites, because the manufacturers have been granting exclusive territories to their franchisees since the beginning of this century when each franchisee had to configure each car they delivered to a customer. In effect, this contractual legacy requires manufacturers to ignore factors such as
20 model availability in referring sales leads to franchisees, consumer-oriented factors that might tip the balance in favor of referring a prospective buyer to another franchisee in the same general area.

A management consultant was quoted recently in the Wall Street Journal who summed up the situation as follows: "It's much more difficult to modify an existing system than starting with a clean slate. If an automaker could start over now, none of them would create a franchise system that looks like the existing one." In the present market, auto makers would prefer an

5 "earn and turn" distribution plan that allocates vehicles on the basis of sales success, rather than territorial demographics, allowing market forces to determine who sells the manufacturer's products. However, these manufacturers cannot sell directly to buyers in the same way that the Dell.com web site of Dell Computer Corporation direct-markets Dell computers, for example, though various attempts have been made.

10 This past year, marketing services such as CarsDirect and AutoNationDirect have been ignoring territorial assignments by selling new cars on-line directly to buyers, nationwide. However, because "just-in-time" manufacturing is more a theory than a reality, when popular models are in short supply, manufacturers require dealers to add unwanted vehicles to their inventories to obtain prompt delivery of the popular models. Furthermore, the franchise laws of

15 some states have been changed to specifically prohibit these Internet-based automobile sales, or ban Internet car sales generally.

The hazards encountered by CarsDirect, AutoNationDirect, and others who have attempted to take advantage of the nationwide scope of the Internet have redirected the evolution of web-based automobile marketing on the web toward acquisition of local franchises. Republic

20 Industries (AutoNation) has purchased clusters of franchises to create regional "superstores". Ford and GM have also sought to integrate their retail outlets in selected regional markets.

Ford's attempt to acquire a minority stake in Ford franchises in five mid-size markets was shelved when problems arose in integrating their operations. Further acquisitions of minority positions in Ford franchises was also either hampered or blocked by legislation tightening local franchise laws. GM's plan to buy outright 5 to 10% of the dealerships in the United States' top 130 retail markets over the next ten years, announced just two months ago is also in trouble. The chairman of the National Automobile Dealers Association (NADA), representing nearly all the franchised dealers in the United States, has called on GM to rethink this "flawed" policy saying, furthermore: "The idea that GM will now compete at the retail level reaffirms the need for strong state franchise laws to protect dealers and buyers."

GM argues that this move will benefit franchisees by providing a place where GM can test new sales techniques, and further develop Internet marketing techniques, and reducing the total number of GM dealerships to a number more consistent with GM's reduced market share. GM also claims that these factory stores will target the customers of rival automakers. However, over the past year GM's internal reorganization of its own sales force, combined with persistent computer problems, has cut into franchisees' revenues by creating artificial shortages of popular models and GM has had little success in attracting customers away from its rivals in the past. Furthermore, one fifth of GM's 7,700 dealerships account for four fifths of its sales. The plan to buy large dealerships in the nation's 130 largest metropolitan areas, even 10% of such dealerships, was seen as a threat. GM has now back pedaled, seeking only a minority interest and giving franchisee's the option of buying back that minority interest.

Having encountered resistance in all these areas, the present immediate goal of those attempting to expand the Internet's role in automobile marketing appears to be vertical

integration. A website called carorder.com (CarOrder), proposes to horizontally consolidate as many as 100 franchises into five regional distribution hubs which will then serve as "virtual" dealerships, retaining little or none of the franchises' investment in bricks, mortar or personnel. Eventually, the only inventory will be a few test-drive vehicles and all other cars will be shifted directly from the manufacturer's truck to a CarOrder truck that delivers them to the buyers. All that will occur at staging areas having no showrooms or maintenance shops. They appear to be, in effect, just another attempt at direct marketing. Anticipating intense legislative opposition to its innovations, a CarOrder executive quipped "we well may be one of the only Internet companies with more lawyers than software engineers". However, the survival of these bare bones "virtual" dealerships depends on their successful vertical integration with manufacturers who are willing to provide no-inventory "just-in-time" manufacturing for their buyers. CarOrder projects that vertical integration could cut \$2,000 to \$4,000 from the price of each vehicle.

The manufacturers aren't far behind. Apparently abandoning its attempt at horizontal economic integration of franchisees in favor of a cybernetic virtual vertical integration with them, Ford has just announced formation of an e-commerce alliance with Microsoft to implement "just-in-time" manufacturing. GM has also announced plans to market made-to-order vehicles on line, but only in Taiwan and other emerging market countries, not in the United States. GM argues that the third world factories there are newer, better suited to this kind of e-commerce, but these markets are also likely to be less hamstrung by GM's contractual commitments as a franchisor.

All these market development strategies are costly. Investments in horizontal and vertical integration, and the dislocations they cause, are likely to increase buyer's costs in the near term, not reduce them. The Internet, too, has potential for reducing retailer overhead, but stale and

inaccurate information is merely a waste of time the adds to the cost to potential buyers. A web site must earn buyer confidence by accurately providing the kind of information the buyer wants, to attract potential buyers to the site, not just the idle and the curious. Dealer-independent quote request sites spend a lot to police dealers' compliance with their data quality and maintenance standards. The cost of policing dealer input to the web site is inescapable, the cost of staying competitive in the very fluid e-commerce marketplace.

For example, Autobytel requires sellers to include a digital picture of each item listed, and requires a daily purging of dealers' lists to remove obsolete information. Autobytel estimates that only 50% of the sales leads they supply to the dealers who do have Internet departments produce a reply to the buyer within their 24 hour commitment. Most web sites can only promise a 48-hour turnaround. Moreover, despite dealers' lack of profitability, and the increasing importance of the Internet to the automobile market, many auto dealers don't even have Internet departments and the rest are slow to reply to Internet queries.

Motivation may well be part of the response latency problem encountered by these web sites. Whenever sales people are asked to provide quotes over the Internet to invisible people, they have no sense of whether or not these invisible people may be potential buyers. Furthermore, experienced Internet sales staff have observed that the on-line sales they do make are seldom for the specific models cited in sales leads. The sales are actually made in subsequent personal contact with the buyer, at the dealership or over the phone, not "over the net". These are not purchases that are made by simply pressing a button next to a picture of the preferred vehicle, like buying a can of soda from a machine.

Manufacturers' recent attempts to reduce overhead by acquiring franchises that would allow them to sell on line in competition with their franchisees have been checkmated. Their made-to-order sales are also subject to the factory delays and delivery problems of conventional automobile manufacturing, still far from a "just-in-time" manufacturing process.

5 Independent automobile e-commerce web sites claim they provide great convenience to the buyer, although some give the buyer little more than an opportunity to fill in a new car order form without the help of a sales assistant. They claim that great savings will become possible when just-in-time manufacturing is fully implemented but, in the meantime, they charge non-competitive list prices for made-to-order vehicles. Aside from the claim that e-commerce can, in
10 theory, reduce search costs, the net value of automobile e-commerce to new car purchasers, in its present form, appears to be its entertainment value. However, the purchase of an automobile is too expensive to be amusing to most people.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

 In accordance with the present invention, a trans-modal quote request channel is provided
15 for an advertizing co-operative. The advertizing co-operative provides an advertisement to members of the public that includes an internet address. Quote requests are submitted in response to that advertisement by requestors using the internet quote site indicated by that internet address. The quote requests submitted by requestors in response to the advertisement are distributed to members of the advertizing co-operative by an administrator.

20 Preferably the internet quote site provides means for submitting a quote request including narrative information. The narrative information enables a member of the advertizing co-operative to provide a price quote based on a recommendation. In a particular embodiment, the

internet quote site provides means for submitting a quote request including narrative information in addition to a specification, that enables a member of the advertizing co-operative to provide price quotes based either on a specification submitted by the requestor or on a recommendation.

Preferably, recommendations and price quotes received from members of the advertising cooperative in response to a quote request are distributed to the requestor by the administrator. In a particular embodiment, the internet quote site provides means for the requestor to request that members of the advertizing cooperative contact the requestor to discuss the quote request.

In a particular embodiment, the identity of a requestor is encrypted in a quote request received by members of the advertizing co-operative. Preferably the identity of the requestor is encrypted in the quote request by assigning sequential values to quote requests in the order in which they were distributed by the administrator and deleting the requestor's contact information.

Preferably, particular telephone area codes are assigned to each member within a large advertizing cooperative, so that members who are too far from the requestor do not receive the request.

The present invention provides a self-policing e-commerce web site that reduces buyers' search costs, and increases the productivity of on-line sales leads without additional advertising expense and administrative cost. Because the web site address is included in the co-operative's traditional advertizing media and not readily obtained on line, fewer idle requests are received and members of the co-operative can provide personalized recommendations in their initial quotes.

The invention also provides a third-party channel that can be used for communicating price and availability information without regard for the geography of members' exclusive territories, so that potential buyers receive quotes from multiple members of the advertizing co-operative. Also, because the potential buyer receives multiple quotes for a given request, the quotes are directly competitive in accuracy and timeliness, as well as price. Because fewer idle requests are received, the invention increases the productivity of the members' Internet operations and narrative information can be processed by the members and their quotes can compete in suitability, as well as price and timeliness.

Preferably the administrator of the third-party channel in accordance with the present invention is paid a fee for each sale made to a requestor by a member of the co-operative who received a request from the requestor. Thus the administrator is an independent agent, able to sanction a member of the co-operative in response to buyer complaints, so as to protect the quality of the e-commerce service provided to the buyer.

In a particular embodiment, a trans-modal print/internet, quote request channel is provided for expediting automobile sales by manufacturer-franchised dealers. The quote request channel provides non-exclusive sales leads to all franchisees of a given franchisor who subscribe to a local advertising cooperative. The sales leads are generated in response to quote requests from buyers visiting a web site advertized by that local advertising cooperative in local media. The quote request channel web site also provides a searchable, regionally-specific presence for the franchisor on the Internet that is consistent with the franchisor's obligations to its franchisees.

Because the quote request channel provides non-exclusive sales leads to all franchisees subscribing to a given local advertising cooperative, a buyer can determine what suitable vehicles are available within the entire market area quickly, without physically leaving home. Because the co-op web site is specific to one manufacturer, the details of each quote request can be considered in depth, without quoting multiple brands. This also makes the purchaser's search more efficient, faster. In particular and brand loyalty is a major feature of the automobile market and, in contrast to the marketing services that do not represent more than 20% of the franchises in a given area, the co-op web site has access to virtually all co-op members. Thus, the purchaser enjoys all the advantages of one-stop shopping for the brand of vehicle he wants.

Quotes provided in response to a request may require acceptance within a specified time constraint, but quote requests may also be held open, permitting franchisees to revise their initial quotes. Furthermore, because quotes initially provided by the franchisees in response to each request are stored on line and the channel is only paid a flat fee by the successful franchisee, the channel can improve market efficiency for the franchisor who subsidizes the local advertising cooperative, and also improve its own profitability, by sanctioning franchisees who provide stale, inaccurate or unresponsive replies to quote requests.

The quote-request channel improves the efficiency of traditional advertizing in attracting and satisfying car buyers, by providing buyers who are ready to buy constantly up-dated price and availability information for the entire geographic sales region represented by the advertising cooperative, without the capital outlay required for the franchisor to acquire the franchises in that area. Because the channel is interactive, but uses the traditional cooperative print-media advertising to attract buyers and define its market area, and it provides non-exclusive leads

within that area, it also improves market efficiency and inter-brand competitiveness for the franchisor by rewarding those franchisees who respond promptly to the requests for quotes generated by those cooperative advertisements.

The interactive sales contacts provided by the quote request channel in accordance with the present invention also permit the independent franchised dealers to manage new-car inventory more efficiently, again without the capital outlay required for the franchisor to acquire the franchises in that area. For example, buyers may provide a narrative description of color and configuration preferences, and the intended use of the vehicle, rather than ordering a specific model and a specific combination of features. That method would allow dealers to propose "suitable" vehicles that are on their lot. Otherwise, they would be quoting made-to-order vehicle prices whenever the exact match is not found. In this way, franchisees can improve their turn over rate by offering suitable vehicles that are actually in their inventory and available immediately, so that they close sales more quickly and the risk of end-of-season backlogs is reduced.

In this way, the channel provides service-based incentives to both the franchisee and the buyer, which permit more efficient management of existing local new-car inventories without suicidal price cutting and without violating franchise commitments or antitrust constraints. For example, the franchisee who more promptly provides an appropriate response to a quote request and the franchisee who more often has an appropriate vehicle in its inventory are both rewarded by increased numbers of buyer contacts. In particular, because this channel also provides guidance for quoting vehicles that are actually in that franchisee's inventory, and immediate

delivery is, in itself, an incentive to buyers to consider models not actually requested, the channel enables franchisees to reduce end-of-season backlogs as well as increase turnover rates.

Because the channel stores the prices and features initially quoted in response to each buyer's request, a buyer's identity need not be disclosed until the buyer is ready to buy. The buyers decide when and if their phone numbers are disclosed to sellers, but all quotes would include the seller's contact information.

On the other hand, however, because the quote-request channel administrator that stores the identity and contact information of each person requesting quotes manages multiple quote request channels for several cooperatives, perhaps representing the products of multiple franchisors, patterns of requests that suggest unproductive frivolous or anti-competitive behavior can be discouraged by the administrator. Because the administrator is only paid when a sale is made, it has a commercial interest in promoting prompt quotes and all other efficient sales practices that enhance competition, not just price cutting.

In lieu of interactive quote requests, buyers not ready to buy may be given the option of selecting a hyperlink to a page of the franchisor's international web site. These sites provide routines that interactively allow a prospective purchaser to determine which of the vehicle models available from the franchisor are suitable for them, possibly using expert-based decision-making routines and other complex special purpose software. The design and operation of this type of program is best left to the franchisor, to minimize overhead and assure that the most current model specification are used. Thus, in a particular embodiment of the invention, where the members of the advertizing co-operative are franchisees of a franchisor having an internet

site, the internet quote site further comprises means for including information selected by the requestor on the franchisor's internet site in a quote request submitted to the administrator.

Brief Description of the Drawings

The invention will be better understood when the detailed description of a preferred embodiment provided below is considered in conjunction with the drawings, wherein:

Fig. 1 is a schematic system diagram of a prior art quote request web site;

Fig. 2 is a schematic system diagram of a quote request channel in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the invention;

Fig. 3 is a flow diagram of the quote request channel shown in Fig. 2; and

Fig. 4 is a schematic diagram illustrating the territorial extent of a large advertizing co-operative's media coverage and the allocation of quote request area codes to its members for the distribution of quote requests in accordance with a particular embodiment of the invention.

In these drawings, like structures are assigned like reference numerals.

Detailed Description of a Preferred Embodiment

In accordance with the present invention shown in Fig. 2, respective trans-modal third-party quote request channels 10, each have a co-op web site 11. Each co-op web site 11 either directly or indirectly supplies quotes 12 of vehicle price and availability generated by members 13 of a respective traditional regional advertizing co-operative to potential buyers 14. The members maintain respective showrooms 13a and maintenance facilities (not shown). The channels 10 are maintained and operated by an independent e-commerce administrator 15 having a quote service (QS) web site 16 that includes a hypertext link 11a to each co-op web site 11. Groups of traditional regional advertizing cooperatives are managed by advertizing agencies 17 funded by

respective automobile manufacturers A, B who also have branded web sites 18 that advertize their products. The agencies 17 supply radio, television and print advertizing copy 19 for a respective automobile manufacturer A, B to the advertizing cooperatives.

Each regional advertizing cooperative is assigned a respective universal resource locator address (URL) 11a for its co-op web site 11. The URL of each co-op web site 11a is also
5 included as a hypertext link on the respective manufacturer's web site 18. The URL of the co-op web site 11a, and an invitation to submit quote requests 20, 21 at the co-op web page 11 on the Internet are provided by the advertisements 19 published in the local radio, television to potential buyers 14 in print media advertizing spaces bought by the cooperative. The URL of the
10 respective manufacturer's web site 18a is also included as a hypertext link on the cooperative's web page 11, as discussed further below and, unlike the co-op web sites 11, the manufacturer's web sites are usually registered with all the major web search services 22. The URLs of the regional co-ops' web sites may also be provided as hyperlinks inside the manufacturers' web sites 18, as a courtesy to persons seeking local price and availability information for the vehicles
15 nationally advertized there. Preferably each quote request is assigned a sequence number 24.

Conventional automobile marketing web sites 30 such as the one shown in Fig. 1 are used to generate sales leads 32 and therefore, unlike the co-op web sites 11 shown in Fig. 2, are registered with as many search engines 22 as possible to make them more visible to browsers 34 who "surf" the web looking for miscellaneous information. These web pages are also provided
20 with headers containing words that are "meta tags" 36 specially selected to make the content of the web site 30 identifiable to web crawlers, the indexing robots that are used by some Internet search services to locate resources on the web that are not already registered with them.

Unlike the sales leads 32 generated by the conventional automobile marketing web site 30 shown in Fig. 1, quote requests are provided to the dealers 13 who do not close a sale free of charge he sales leads provided by the quote request web site 11 in Fig. 2. Although the quote request web site 11 in Fig. 2 is not paid for all the quote requests 25 it provides to the dealers 13, it is a viable independent service because, by design, it enjoys a lower operating overhead as well as greater latitude in its dealings with underperforming members of the co-op than franchise agreements permit the manufacturers A, B, to have.

In particular, because the URL of the co-op's web site 11 is specific to that co-operative, it can be included without charge in the co-operative's traditional media advertizing 19. Thus the administrator 15 need not spend money for branding or even registering the co-op web sites 11 shown in Fig. 2. It need not be listed with those Internet search engines 24, and may prefer not to even provide identifiable meta tags 36, as discussed further below.

Also, because the co-op web site's service is directed to sales of the products advertized by the manufacturer's advertizing agency 17, the administrator 15 can require co-op members to self-assess the fees owed for sales made to persons who requested quotes 13. Thus, its accounting and collections overhead is minimized. Furthermore, because the co-operative's web site is maintained in co-operation with the advertizing agency that provides the co-operative's advertizing media, the advertizing agency's own internal tabulation of co-op members' sales, a tabulation that the advertizing agency 17 uses to track the success of advertizing campaigns, can be used for auditing members' compliance with this self-assessment agreement.

Thus, if the fees paid to the administrator for sales in each month decline as a proportion of total sales over several months, this is known to the administrator from the records of the co-

operative. The administrator then need only contact the requestors who were not reported to have purchased a vehicle from a member of the co-operative to determine whether the requestor purchased a vehicle, and from whom it was purchased. Alternatively, new entries in the Reynolds & Reynolds or Polk automobile registries can be scanned for automobiles sold to those requestors if they are unavailable for this purpose. A member/franchisee having consistently low sales to requestors who is found to have breached their agreement to pay the administrator's quote service fee can be summarily dropped by the administrator, unlike the manufacturer/franchisor. Members of the co-operative can simply be summarily dropped from the administrator's quote distribution process, because the administrator is independent of the manufacturer A, B and its ad agency 17, avoiding the legal costs incurred when franchisor's attempt to sanction non-compliant franchisee's.

On the other hand, the channel provides better quality quote requests than the marketing service web sites, such as the one shown in Fig. 1, because the quote request channel 10 shown in Fig. 2 is a trans-modal channel that is accessed by potential buyers 14 in response to the co-operative's traditional media advertizing campaign materials 19, only a small percentage of the quote requests 20, 21 that it distributes to co-op members are likely to come through from browsers 34. Like the telephone inquiries traditionally generated by the co-op's advertizing, the quote requests in Fig. 2 require potential buyers to put down the Sunday paper and go on-line to use this service.

These quote requests are not generated by the operation of meta tags 26 and search engines 22, thus they are not available to satisfy idle curiosity. In particular, narrative requests 21 are less likely to be submitted frivolously than multiple choice or guided, fill-in-the-blanks

requests for specific models 20 and it is likely to be obvious when narratives are concocted for the sake of entertainment rather than to obtain information. Preferably, the web site is visually simple and purely functional in its design, to discourage browsers.

5 The opportunity to concentrate on individual requests, without the distraction of frivolous requests is particularly important in used car sales, where each request must be individually researched. In general, the quote request channel 10 shown in Fig. 2 adds a new dimension to the co-operative advertizing campaign in that each quote request received from the co-op's web site 11 can provide the members' sales people preliminary information on buyer needs and preferences before the initial telephone or face to face contact. This information was not 10 previously available to members 13 through the advertizing agency's 17 advertizing campaigns.

The quote request channel 10 is also clearly a convenience for potential buyers 14. Quotes 12 are provided by multiple dealers in response to the submission of a single, computer-aided quote request 20, 20. This eliminates the need to call every listed co-op member just to get a few quotes on suitable vehicles in stock. However, the requestor can submit multiple requests, 15 when there are different types of vehicles that might satisfy the requestor's needs. Alternatively, a specific request and a more general narrative may be jointly submitted, or submitted separately by a requestor as shown for SALE #1 in Fig. 2.

Because the quote request web site is specific to the manufacturer's brand, informational displays used on the manufacturer's web site may be hyper-linked to the retailers' co-op web 20 page. In particular, integration of multiple-choice model specification routines implemented on the manufacturer's web site onto the co-op's quote request web page gives the buyer the option of specifying details such as the number and location of cup holders in the vehicle. Thus,

although the administrator preferably does not build and maintain such elaborate product design data bases, if the potential buyer completes a specification on the manufacturer's web site and actuates radio-button to return to the co-op web site, the detailed specification selected on the manufacturer's web site can be copied to the co-op web site as a request for a made-to-order price quote from the members of the local co-operative, if the requestor so desires.

Preferably, the co-op's web site 11 is one of a plurality of quote request web sites 11 managed by the administrator 15 for the products of more than one manufacturer A, B. Also, because more expensive vehicles are not sold in large number, and sales by cooperatives for those brands will occur less frequently, the administrator's service fee may be set as a percentage of the list price on actual sale price of the vehicle sold. Specifically, under agreements negotiated by the administrator 15 with the advertizing agencies 17, or the individual cooperatives, the administrator 15 should be paid approximately 1% of any sale made within forty-five days after a request 20, 21 was supplied to the seller. For used car sales, and other small transactions, the minimum fee for this quote service would be approximately US\$100 at current rates.

Thus, only the members of the advertizing cooperative 11 who succeeded in making that sale, not cooperative members who do not yet have an Internet department, or those members who find that they are unsuccessful in using the quote request channel 10 or choose not to use it, for any reason, pay for the quote request service. Moreover, because the quote request channel 10 is paid for the sale made through each successful contact provided, the content of the quote does not affect the fee. Thus requests can be narratives and quotes can be freely added and revised without paying additional fees, as further information becomes available to the dealer.

Thus dealers are encouraged to update the quotes they provide to the prospective buyer 20 through the administrator 12.

If a buyer does not wish to be contacted by dealers, price and availability information 12 quoted by the members 13 in response to a given request 20, 21 will be collected by the administrator 15. Preferably, the administrator 15 automatically relays that information back to a requestor, either by sending it to the requestor's e-mail address, or when the buyer checks the cooperative's web site 11 for replies to the requestor's quote request 20, 21 using the quote request number 24 as a password. Alternatively, the requestor can click a "call me" button on the web page where the request is entered and the information needed to contact the requestor will be forwarded with the narrative or model specification information provided in the quote request to members of the co-operative.

The quote requests 20, 21 can provide either a detailed specification 20 of the vehicle's configuration based on a multiple-choice inventory-pricing routine provided by the web site 18 maintained by that respective manufacturer A, B, or a request for vehicle recommendation 21 that is a narrative which may or may not specify a particular model. In requests for vehicle recommendation 21, buyers may provide a narrative description of color and configuration preferences, the intended use of the vehicle, with or without a specific model or particular manufacturer's options. These, recommendations 21 are advantageous because they allow each franchisee 25 to quote a price for a suitable vehicle that is currently in the franchisee's inventory, for example one of those vehicles that the franchisee had to accept as inventory in order to obtain prompt delivery of more popular models ordered by previous customers. Thus, requests for recommendations 21 allow price-sensitive buyers to specifically inquire about vehicles that are

available at reduced prices. They also provide information needed whenever the model specified by the buyer is not found by the cooperative in its inventory. They become critically important to making the sale when the buyer is pressed for time.

Thus, when prospective buyers request recommendations 21 franchisees can improve their turn over rate by offering suitable vehicles that are actually in their inventory and available immediately, so that they close sales more quickly and reduce end-of-season backlogs. At the same time, accepting such a recommended alternative permits the buyer to avoid the delivery delays and factory invoice-based pricing that the made-to-order vehicles are subject to.

For the viewpoint of the prospective purchaser, it is advantageous to have the quote requests 20, 21 provided by the administrator 15 to all franchisees 13 in the advertizing coop as non-exclusive quote requests, rather than sales leads, particularly exclusive sales leads. The resulting quotes 12 are more likely to include truly competitive prices than quotes provided in response to exclusive sales leads, particularly made-to-order quotes which may be little better than factory list prices.

Preferably, quotes 12 provided by the franchisee are accessible to the prospective buyer 20 on the web site 11 or provided by telephone, e-mail or other means, within forty eight hours after the initial request is submitted. Preferably these quotes include information for contacting franchisees, including a name of a specific sales person familiar with the quote, the direct telephone number for that person, and a hypertext e-mail link. The quotes provided in response to a request may require acceptance within the 48-hour time constraint, but at the end of that 48-hour period, a prospective buyer may opt to receive further quotes by e-mail and, in that event the franchisees may opt to revise their deadlines and/or their respective price quotes.

In small and mid-size advertizing cooperatives, all quote requests 18 entered on the cooperative's web site 11 are sent to all members 13 of the cooperative, unless a member 13 asks to be excluded from receiving quote requests for certain types of vehicles, etc. In Fig. 4, however, the shaded area represents the sales territory of a geographically large advertizing cooperative having four members #1-#4, each representing a geographical cluster of a half a dozen dealerships, or more, for the sake of convenience. The broken line represents the limit of the area effectively covered by the cooperative's advertizing media, a metropolitan area including telephone area codes A-P. The most densely populated areas have the area codes A-C. These clusters of dealers would preferably be assigned quote requests having some subset of the telephones area codes within the effective reach of the co-operative's advertizing, for the convenience of the requestor and in the interest of fairness among the members:

#1: A-L, P, O.

#2: A-I, K, L, M.

#3: A-N.

#4: A-J, N-P.

In New York, for example, there are 37 members of the local Volvo dealers' advertizing co-operative, three in Connecticut, twenty-one in New York, and thirteen in New Jersey, having territories extending from Bridgeport in south central Connecticut, to Red Bank in east central New Jersey. It can take more than three hours to travel between the outmost dealerships in this co-operative. Thus, except in special circumstances, southern New Jersey and eastern Connecticut dealers would not receive the same quote requests. New Jersey member would receive quote requests with area codes located in Pennsylvania and areas of New York state near

its border. Connecticut and the members on the northern edge of the New York sales territories would receive any quote requests that have upstate New York area codes.

The invention has been described with reference to a presently preferred embodiment thereof, but it will be apparent to one skilled in the art that variations and modifications are possible within the spirit and scope of the invention. For example, the co-op web sites may be implemented as pages within a particular URL-designated site. Also, the administrator may, in some instances, be a part of the advertizing agency, in instances where the convenience of such integration outweighs the value of having a quote request interface that is neutral in the relationships between manufacturers and their franchisees, and familiar to purchasers from its use by other brands and/or other products. Furthermore, the competitive advantages of the improved responsiveness and reduced request-response time provided to customers in accordance with the present invention, and the low additional cost of operating a trans-modal channel could be beneficial to any cooperative retail advertizing group, not just automobile retailers.

I CLAIM:

1 1. A quote request channel for providing quotes to a person requesting a quote, said
2 channel comprising:
3 an internet quote site provided by an administrator, said internet quote site having a quote
4 site address, said internet quote site providing the requestor means for submitting a quote request
5 to the administrator;
6 an advertisement for an advertizing cooperative having members, said advertisement
7 providing said quote site address to the requestor; and
8 means for distributing a quote request submitted to the administrator by the requestor
9 using said internet quote site to members of said advertizing cooperative and receiving quotes
10 from members of said advertizing cooperative.

1 2. The quote request channel of claim 1 further comprising:
2 means for including narrative information in a quote request submitted to the
3 administrator.

1 3. The quote request channel of claim 1 further comprising:
2 means for including information selected by the requestor using said internet quote site in
3 a quote request submitted to the administrator.

1 4. The quote request channel of claim 1 wherein the members are franchisees of a
2 franchisor having a franchisor internet site, said quote request channel further comprising:
3 means for including information selected by the requestor on the franchisor internet site
4 in a quote request submitted to the administrator.

1 5. The quote request channel of claim 1 further comprising means for encrypting the
2 identity of a requestor as a code in a quote request distributed by the administrator to a member
3 of said advertizing cooperative.

1 6. The quote request channel of claim 7 wherein each of said codes is a sequential code
2 assigned to the quote requests in the order in which they are distributed by the administrator.

1 7. The quote request channel of claim 1 wherein means for distributing quote requests to
2 members of a large advertizing cooperative distributes a quote request in accordance with the
3 requestor's telephone area code, so that some members of said large advertizing cooperative who
4 are farthest from the requestor do not receive the quote request.

1 8. The quote request channel of claim 1 further comprising means for distributing quotes
2 received by said administrator from members of said advertizing cooperative to the requestor by
3 e-mail.

1 9. The quote request channel of claim 1 further comprising means for distributing quotes
2 received by said administrator from members of said advertizing cooperative to the requestor
3 when the requestor queries said internet quote site.

1 10. The quote request channel of claim 9 further comprising:
2 means for encrypting the identity of a requestor as a code in a quote request distributed by
3 the administrator to a member of said advertizing cooperative; and
4 means for distributing quotes received by said administrator from members of said
5 advertizing cooperative to the requestor when the requestor enters said code on said internet
6 quote site.

1 11. A method of providing quotes to requestors of a product, said method comprising the
2 steps of:
3 publishing an advertisement, said advertisement including a quote site address for a
4 cooperative having members;
5 receiving a quote request submitted using a internet quote site indicated by said quote site
6 address; and

7 distributing said received quote request to members of an advertizing cooperative
8 publishing said cooperative advertisement for the product and receiving quotes from members of
9 said advertizing cooperative.

1 12. The method of claim 11 further comprising the step of including narrative
2 information in a quote request submitted to the administrator using the internet quote site.

1 13. The method of claim 11 further comprising the step of including information selected
2 by the requestor using the internet quote site in a quote request submitted to the administrator.

1 14. The method of claim 11 wherein the members are franchisees of a franchisor having
2 a franchisor internet site, said method further comprising the step of including information
3 selected by the requestor using the franchisor internet site in a quote request submitted to the
4 administrator.

1 15. The method of claim 11 further comprising the step of encrypting the identity of a
2 requestor as a code in a quote request distributed by the administrator.

1 16. The method of claim 15 further comprising the step of selecting a sequential code
2 for encrypting the identity of a requestor in accordance with the order in the quote request is
3 distributed by the administrator.

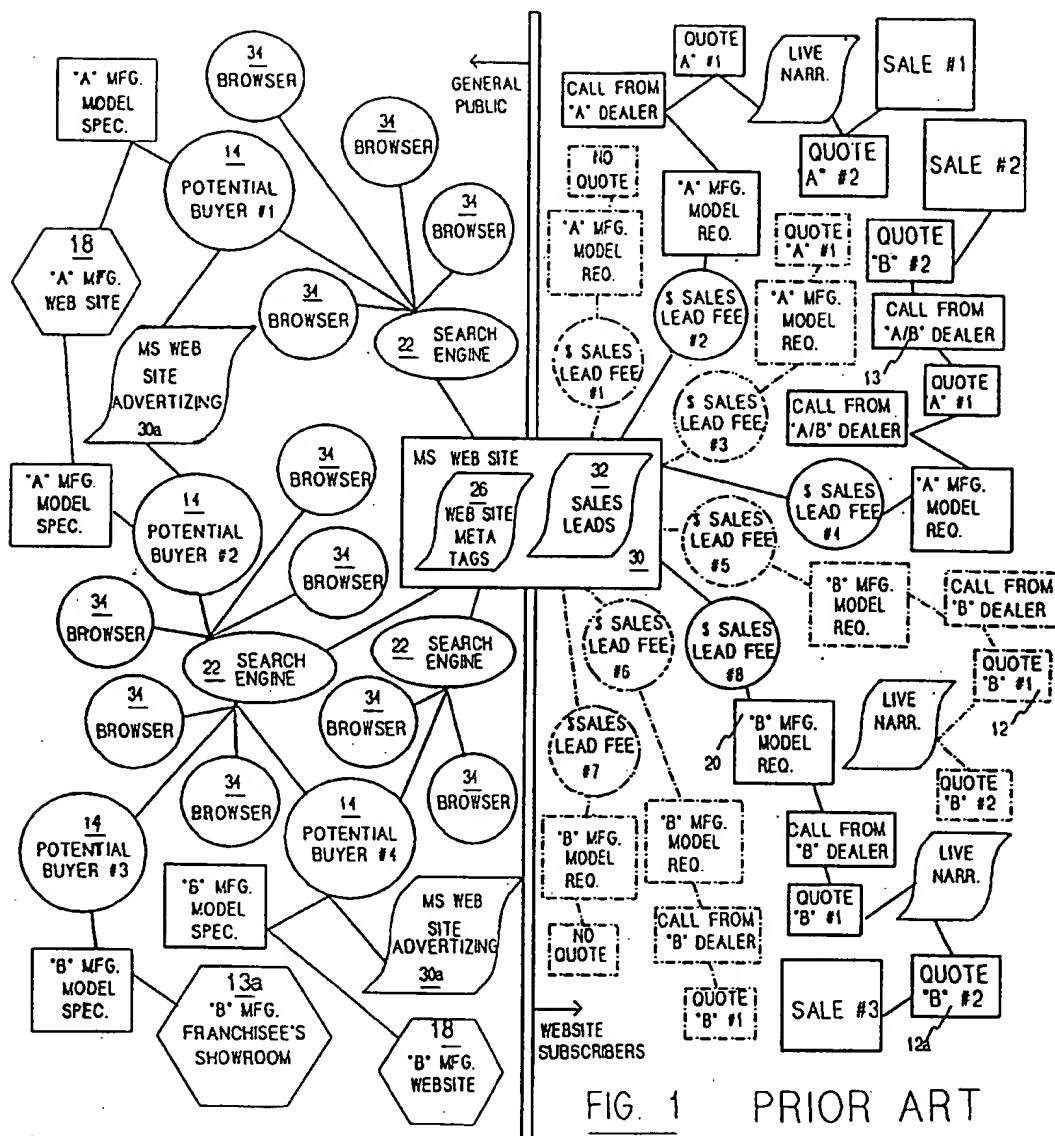
1 17. The method of claim 11 further comprising the step of distributing quote requests to
2 members of a large advertizing cooperative in accordance with the requestor's telephone area
3 code, so that some members of said large advertizing cooperative who are farthest from the
4 requestor do not receive the quote request.

1 18. The method of claim 11 further comprising the step of distributing quotes received
2 by said administrator from members of said advertizing cooperative to the requestor by e-mail.

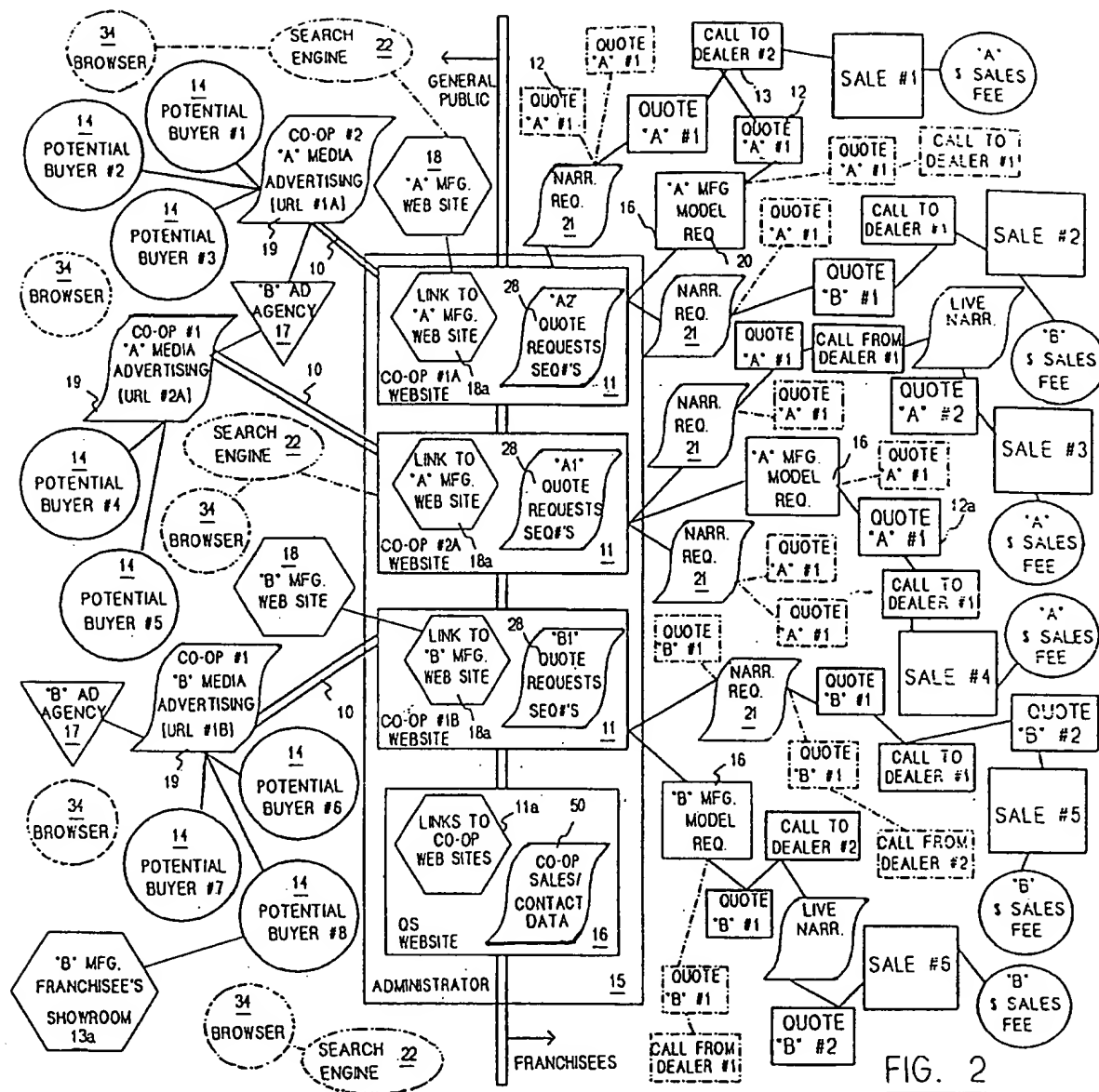
1 19. The method of claim 11 further comprising the step of distributing quotes received
2 by said administrator from members of said advertizing cooperative to the requestor when the
3 requestor queries said internet quote site.

1 20. The method of claim 11 further comprising the steps of:
2 encrypting the identity of a requestor as a code in a quote request distributed by the
3 administrator to a member of said advertizing cooperative; and
4 distributing quotes received by said administrator from members of said advertizing
5 cooperative to the requestor when the requestor enters said code on said internet quote site.
6 distributing quotes received by said administrator from members of said advertizing cooperative
7 to the requestor when the requestor queries said internet quote site.

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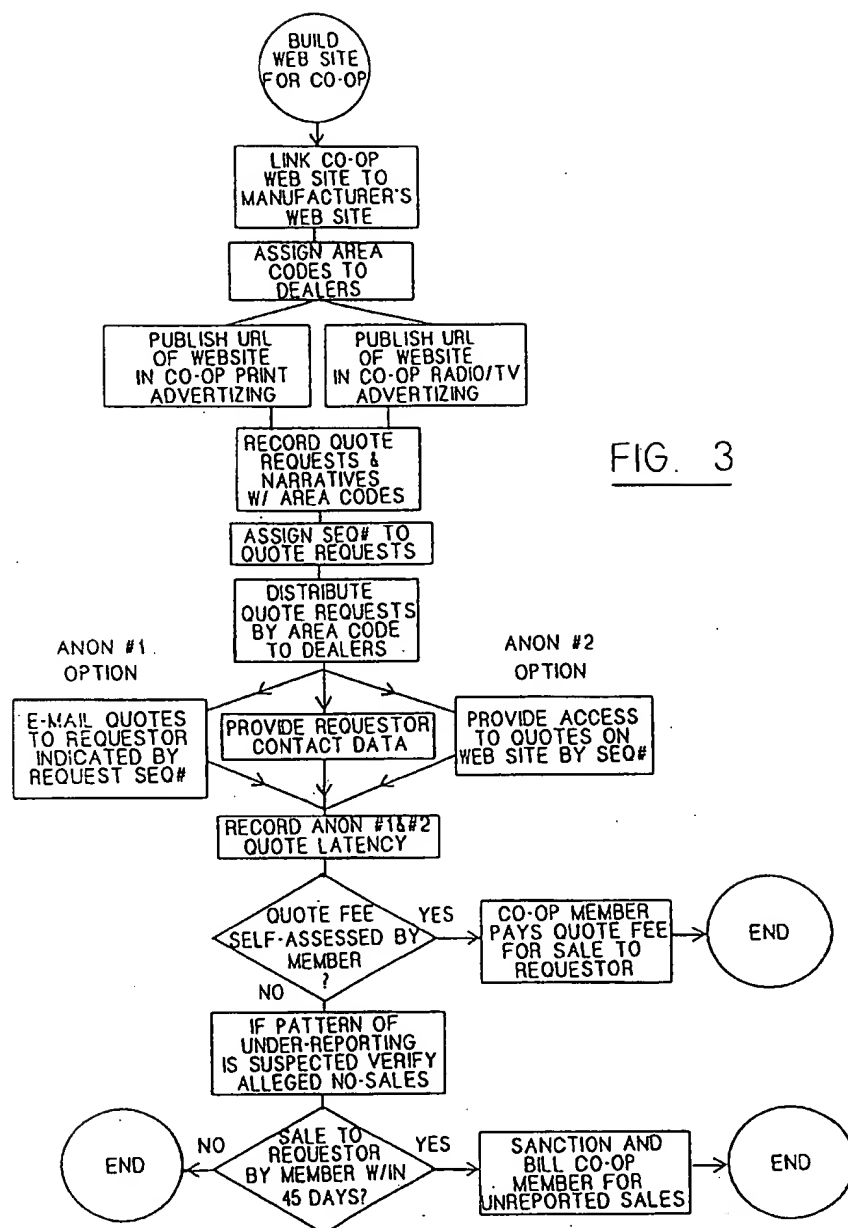


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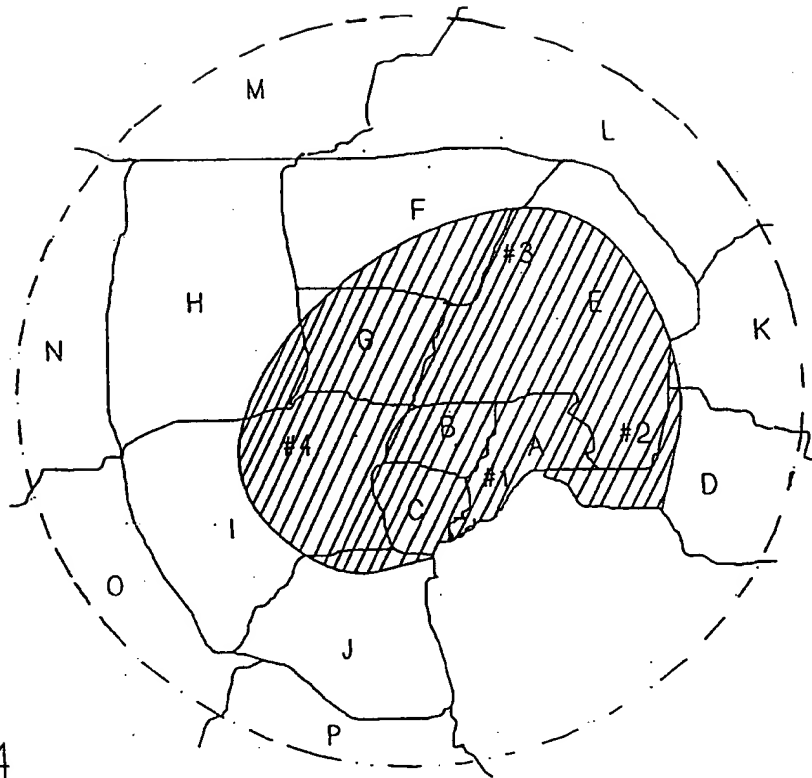


FIG. 4

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US00/31628

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(7) :G06F 17/60

US CL :705/26

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

U.S. : 705/26

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X,P	US 6,064,981 A (BARNI et al) 16 May 2000, col.2, line 3-col.8, line 37.	1-6, 11-16
A	US 5,978,799 A (HIRSCH) 02 November 1999, col.1, line 46-col.4, line 36.	1, 11
A	US 5,842,178 A (GIOVANNOLD) 24 November 1998, abstract	1-20
A,P	US 6,078,906 A (HUBERMAN) 20 June 2000, abstract	1-20

☐ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. ☐ See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:	"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention
"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance	"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone
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"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)	"&" document member of the same patent family
"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means	
"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed	

Date of the actual completion of the international search

10 MARCH 2001

Date of mailing of the international search report

24 APR 2001

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